

# Organizational Commitment: A Proposal for a Wider Ethical Conceptualization of ‘Normative Commitment’

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**ABSTRACT.** Conceptualization and measurement of organizational commitment involve different dimensions that include economic, affective, as well as moral aspects labelled in the literature as: ‘continuance’, ‘affective’ and ‘normative’ commitment. This multidimensional framework emerges from the convergence of different research lines. Using Aristotle’s philosophical framework, that explicitly considers the role of the will in human commitment, it is proposed a rational explanation of the existence of mentioned dimensions in organizational commitment. Such a theoretical proposal may offer a more accurate definition of ‘affective commitment’ that distinguishes feelings from rational judgments. The use of a philosophical explanation coherent with psychological

findings also allows the discovery of a wider moral concept of ‘normative commitment’.

**KEY WORDS:** affective commitment, Allen and Meyer’s model, Aristotle, ethics, organizational commitment, normative commitment.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Interest in organizational commitment is not new. Several decades of research have been devoted to this field. Among the reasons that may explain this fact are the characteristics of today’s markets and organizations. The involvement of people in organizations becomes crucial when innovation, continuous improvement, high quality standards, and competitive prices are demanded of companies, and employee discretionary effort comes to be an essential resource.

The aim of this work is to clarify some of the confusion existing in the organizational commitment literature with regard to its very nature and its ethical dimension. This study will try to offer some guides to solve the problems described in previous research concerning the consideration of ethical aspects of commitment to organizations, and also, it will offer some theoretical proposals with implications for further research.

It is now well recognized and widely accepted that commitment itself is a ‘multidimensional construct’ (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). First to be presented in this work is a brief discussion of questions already studied in the literature such as: what commitment is, what the objective of

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commitment is, what the antecedents of commitment are, what the consequences of commitment are, and what makes commitment different from motivation.

The second part of this work starts with a brief description of the three dimensions ('continuance', 'affective' and 'normative') proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991). These authors propose a model based upon a synthesis that is "derived from an effort to identify themes or commonalities in existing definitions of commitment" (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 13), but lacking sound philosophical rationale able to explain its very nature.

In an attempt to offer a rationale for the presence of the three dimensions in this construct, the third part of this work will start by describing the three-dimensional conception of goods proposed by the Aristotelian philosophical tradition. Surprisingly, such a distinction and the implications in human relationships seem to offer a sound rationale for better understanding the three-dimensional concept of commitment proposed by Allen and Meyer (1990).

On the other hand, the definition of the moral dimension explained in the Aristotelian tradition makes it possible to better understand the content of normative commitment and to build a wider definition of moral commitment. This part ends with an attempt to establish a parallelism between the commitment dimensions proposed by Allen and Meyer and the kinds of human goods proposed by Aristotle.

In the fourth part, this work develops propositions that may help to improve some of the theoretical basis of organizational commitment regarding its affective and ethical dimension. Among the statements proposed here, and related to a delineated definition of 'affective commitment' and a necessary wider conception of ethics in commitment literature, propositions described would have important implications for both researchers and managers in terms of a better understanding of higher employee organization contribution.

### **'Organizational commitment': concept, antecedents and consequences**

After a review of the literature, and a descriptive listing of definitions proposed from different

approaches, Meyer and Herscovitch (2001, p. 301) present a definition of commitment in the workplace that seems to be consistent with many of the previous descriptions of this concept in general. Commitment is described as: "a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more aims". Other expressions that also define this concept in the specialised literature are: 'psychological state' (Allen and Meyer, 1990, p. 14), 'psychological attachment' (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986, p. 493) or 'psychological bound' (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, p. 171).

Another question is: Commitment to what? Do you commit to a person, to an institution, to a goal? The answer given is that the aim of commitment could be an entity or a specific behaviour (see Figure 1).

People could be attached to organizations, unions or occupations (entities) – Attitudinal commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 9) – or to some courses of action (continuing membership, goals or policies) – Behavioural commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 9). Conclusively, commitment is described including both aspects, but emphasizing the course of action, and then describing the final objective or objectives (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001, p. 309).

Once we know the focus of commitment, it makes sense to ask what the antecedents of organizational commitment are. Following Meyer and Allen (1997) and Iverson and Buttigieg (1999), three main antecedent groups could be distinguished: (1) Organizational variables, such as the nature of a job, job design, human resource policies, communication and participation policies, or manager behaviours; (2) Personal variables, such as age, gender, tenure, job expectations, job values, kinship responsibilities, affectivity and motivation toward work; and (3) environmental variables like job opportunities. However, empirical evidence shows mixed results that are sometimes inconclusive or weak, as is the case with personal variables like age, gender or tenure (Allen and Meyer, 1993; Aven et al., 1993; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990).

Following MacNeil (1985) and the Rousseau contributions (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1995), we can find the antecedent of organizational commitment in 'psychological contracts'. These contracts, between organizations

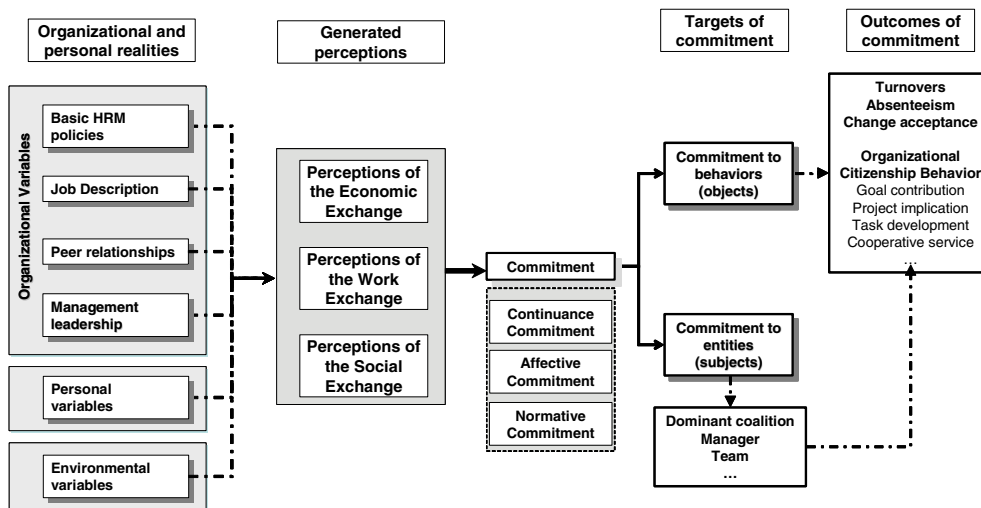


Figure 1. Commitment: antecedents, targets and outcomes.

and individuals, could be of *transactional* or *relational* nature. Like these authors emphasize, transactional contracts are the antecedent of continuance commitment, while relational contracts explain normative commitment. This idea is developed and extended by Cardona et al. (2004) who proposes 'exchange relationships' as the antecedent of organizational commitment. These authors add a third class of 'exchange relationships' labelled as *work exchange relationships* that reflect the individual's level of fulfilment while performing his job.

Knowing the antecedents explaining organizational commitment, we should focus on the consequences of it. How can we observe commitment? Most organizational commitment literature analyses outcome behaviours such as turnover, absenteeism, job performance, organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and/or change acceptance (Iverson and Buttigieg, 1999), that are, principally, measures of action versus omission decisions. Nevertheless, some published findings pertaining to organizational citizenship behaviour literature show OCB as an outcome of organizational commitment (Shore and Wayne, 1993). However, one of the clearest demonstrations of the relation between commitment and OCB can be found in Cardona et al. (2004), who demonstrates that the level of attachment to a job, and to an organization, are good predictors of OCB behaviours.

After this description of the focus of organizational commitment, the antecedents and its consequences,

the question about the very nature of commitment still remains. In early works, Allen, Meyer and collaborators (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991) try to synthesize three different research lines: first, coming from Porter et al. (1974, p. 604) focused on attitudes – "The strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization"; second, taking into account Becker (1960, p. 33) who apparently focused on behaviours – "Consistent lines of activity" based on the individual's recognition of the cost of doing otherwise; and finally, using Wiener (1982, p. 471) a definition focused on believes – "Totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way, which meets organizational goals and interest". Individuals show this behaviour because "they believe it is the 'right' and moral thing to do" (Wiener, 1982, p. 421).

Undoubtedly we have to recognise outstanding conceptual advances in the explanation of commitment antecedents, targets and outcomes described. But, nevertheless, it seems that a more articulated explanation of the construct and its three-dimensionality is necessary. New theoretical efforts are required to expound the three widely recognised 'bases of commitment' to delineate their content. Such contributions should also be able to explain the current statistical overlapping of the 'affective' and 'normative' dimensions of commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 122).

Moreover, if commitment is described as a frame of mind or psychological state that compels an

individual towards a course of action, should we make a more emphasized distinction between intentions and actions in this conception? Is the final action a necessary outcome of a 'psychological-state', and then, as a consequence, something mechanistic, or the result of a free decision, a consequence of human will? If the free human will is not explicitly included in the definition of commitment, can we really talk about a moral dimension?

An integrative and embracing concept is still needed. The main purpose of the following section is to review the content of the three dimensions of commitment offered by the Allen and Meyer model, and to propose a wider concept of moral commitment based upon the Aristotelian ethical tradition.

### Dimensions of organizational commitment

While there are differences among authors concerning the concept and nature of organizational commitment, important similarities can be found as well. Most thinkers in this field include a 'cost-based dimension', which acknowledges that individuals can become committed to a course of action in an organization because of the perceived cost of failing to do so, or because they don't have any other job alternative. This dimension has been labelled as 'continuance commitment' or 'alienative commitment' (Becker, 1960).

Later 'continuance commitment' has been spread out in two dimensions: 'high sacrifice' – the personal cost of abandoning and losing an investment in an organization – and 'low alternatives' – where there are few existing employment alternatives feasible for the individual – (Hackett et al., 1994; McGee and Ford, 1987; Meyer et al., 1990). 'Continuance commitment' is a well developed dimension of organizational commitment, and empirical works show a well founded and strong chain of causality. But is 'continuance commitment' really a commitment dimension? (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 15) Some authors defend that 'continuance commitment' explains why people remain in an organization, but that it is not a real commitment (Ko et al., 1997). Evidence of such is that 'continuance commitment', based on the evaluation of the 'economic exchange relationship', does not correlate with OCB behaviours (Cardona et al., 2004).

A second dimension commonly agreed upon for commitment is the 'affective dimension' which explains the bond to an organization as an affective attachment which includes feelings like: "affection, warmth, belongingness, loyalty, fondness, pleasure, and so on" (Jaros et al., 1993, p. 954). This concept is labelled as 'affective commitment'. While the first dimension explains the bond of employees to the organization because they *need* to stay, the second dimension could be explained in that employees want – in terms of desire – to stay (Iverson and Buttigieg, 1999). Although, the core of this dimension is an affective tendency (including: desires, wishes, feelings, etc.), we have to emphasize that, in fact, it has been defined in a broad way. Authors also include concepts such as 'identification with', or 'congruence of', organization and individual goals and values (see Meyer and Allen, 1997, pp. 11–12). The former aspects are mostly related to previous rational judgments, and not so much to affective tendencies and feelings, as will be discussed in the next section.

On the other hand, while authors like Porter et al. (1974) and Penley and Gould (1988) include loyalty in the 'affective dimension', Meyer and colleagues (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 1993) make a distinction between the desire to be loyal and the obligation to be loyal (Melé, 2001). As a result, a third dimension of commitment is identified: the 'obligation dimension' – the perceived obligation to pursue a course of action, labelled by these authors as 'normative commitment'.

The concept of 'normative commitment' is widened, first by Penley and Gould (1988, p. 46) who talk of 'moral commitment' as "acceptance of and identification with organizational goals". Later, Jaros et al. (1993, p. 955) will use the same term to describe "the degree to which an individual is psychologically attached to an employing organization through internalization of its goals, values and missions". This dimension differs from affective commitment because it is not necessarily an emotional attachment, but reflects a sense of moral duty (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). Nevertheless, there is no explicit reference to a moral internal judgment and behaviour. This reflects an important distinction between the two dimensions (see Table I), but it gives a narrow conception of morality as just reduced to a set of social accepted norms. As it will be discussed later, this conception could be widened.

TABLE I  
Reasons explaining commitment

Dimension label Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001	Reasons explaining commitment	
	Allen and Meyer, 1997 Commitment to the organization	Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001 Commitment to a course of action
Continuance Commitment ( <i>Cost analysis</i> )	“refers to awareness of the <i>cost</i> associated with leaving the organization” (pg. 12)	“individuals can become committed to a course of action because of the perceived <i>cost</i> of failing to do so ” (pg. 308)
Affective Commitment ( <i>Emotive attachment</i> )	“refers to employees’ emotional attachment to , identification with , and involvement with the organization because they <i>want</i> do so” (pg. 12)	“a mind-set characterized by a <i>desire</i> to follow a course of action” (pg. 308) (e.g. continue employment, exert effort to achieve organizational goals, OCB)
Normative Commitment ( <i>Rational attachment</i> )	“refers to employees’ <i>feeling</i> of obligation to remain with the organization; Individuals feel they ought to remain” (pg. 12)	“perceived <i>obligation</i> to pursue a course of action” (pg. 308) (Based on Jaros et al, 1993)

As Jaros et al. (1993) underlines, the main distinction between affective commitment and moral commitment is that while the first is based on an emotional bond, the second is based on a rational bond. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that employees with high levels of moral commitment should show the strongest binds towards his/her organization.

Empirical investigations present important evidence of the potential explanative power of this three-dimensional conceptualization of commitment (Ko et al., 1997). But, at the same time, criticism endures: low reliability of the continuance commitment scale, and lack of discriminating validity between affective and normative commitment scales. In fact, there are several research works that point to the high correlation between affective and normative commitment (Frutos et al., 1998; Ko et al., 1997; Meyer et al., 1993), and the questionable construct validity of continuance and normative commitment.

On the other hand, if we look at the behaviours explained by different kinds of commitment, we notice that affective commitment correlates significantly and more strongly with a wider range of outcome measures – continued employment, attendance and performance, whereas the consequence of normative and continuance commitment is quite narrow and specific – continued employment (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Stanley et al. (1999)

conducted a meta-analysis to examine correlations between three commitment dimensions and behaviours like turnover, turnover intention, absenteeism, job performance and organizational citizenship. In all cases the pattern was the same – affective commitment correlates more strongly with every observed behaviour than normative and continuance commitment. In Meyer and Herscovitch’s (2001, p. 311) words, “one possible explanation is that affective commitment is generally defined and operationalized more broadly than continuance and normative commitment”, as it was emphasized above.

In the case of continuance commitment, deficiencies in reliability and construct validity had been solved unfolding it into two dimensions: “personal cost of abandoning” and “low alternatives or few existing employment alternatives”; and widening the measurement scales in congruence with the new conceptualization. As Frutos et al. (1998, p. 361) state, a theoretical model with four separated scales: continuance commitment<sub>1</sub> (cost of abandoning), continuance commitment<sub>2</sub> (low alternatives), affective commitment and normative commitment, show a significant improvement in its explanatory capacity.

Turning back to normative commitment, Ko et al. (1997) show the overlapping of the mentioned dimension with affective commitment. Statistically it is expressed in terms of a high correlation



between normative and affective commitment and a lack of discriminating validity. For those authors, the conceptual consequence is that they consider normative commitment as an extension of affective commitment.

Why such an overlapping? Although, theoretically Jaros et al. (1993) makes a distinction between the affective and moral dimensions, this work remains an exception. In practice, specialised literature continues offering definitions and scales where feelings of obligation, guilt, debt or correctness are present, at the same time, in the 'affective' and in the 'normative' Allen and Meyers' dimensions. The result is an indistinguishable mix between affectivity and rationality, feelings and rational will. An added operative related problem is that normative commitment scales usually focused narrowly on loyalty behaviours and staying in the organization.

Ko et al. (1997, p. 971) states that "considerable conceptual work needs to be done and new measures should be developed" in order to develop a renewed concept of moral commitment and to adequately assess it. The key to carry out this task is to make a clear distinction between the sentimental and rational scopes, but without forgetting that they are not separable. In order to do so, it is necessary to look for a theoretical basis which gives support to a broad concept of moral commitment, which specially includes moral judgements and virtues, and that enables the development of a multidimensional commitment model with improved predictive and explanatory capability.

### **'Organizational commitment': an Aristotelian approach**

In order to better understand 'organizational moral commitment', we devote the next section to explain the necessary distinction between the calculated, affective and moral dimensions of commitment. To do that on the basis of a solid and robust theoretical framework, we propose the Aristotelian distinction of human goods.

There is an important amount of theoretical work devoted to the explanation of commitment, as well as loyalty, inside organizations (Chen et al., 2002; Olson-Buchanan, 2002; Pina e Cunha, 2002; Rosanas and Velilla, 2003). Nevertheless, not much

theoretical work seems to have been done from the field of business ethics to explain why organizational commitment should include three dimensions. Why are the three spheres presented as a multidimensional mind-set in which final commitment is the combination of the three of them (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001)? Is it that these three dimensions are sufficient, necessary and complementary aspects of the same reality of commitment, a 'net sum' (Allen and Meyer, 1990)? But why is this so?

The proposal here is that a sound philosophical explanation of this phenomenon is needed, and it can be found in the Aristotelian ethical tradition. To give an explanation of why these three spheres ('continuance', 'affective' and 'normative') seem to be necessary and complementary, we propose to use the Aristotelian distinction of human goods that he describes in the context of human relationships and friendship. As will be discussed now, such a philosophical distinction is parallel and quite similar to the dimensions of the psychological mindset proposed by Allen and Meyer (1990).

Aristotle describes three objects, or ends, pursued in a friendship relationship, and in this sense, of three types of friendship: 'friendship for utility', 'friendship for pleasure' and 'friendship of good people'. "Perhaps these questions (of friendship) will become clear once we find out what it is that is lovable. For it seems, not everything is loved, but (only) what is lovable, and this is either good, or pleasant or useful" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 2, 1155b20).

While there are many goods that we human beings pursue in our actions and relationships, these goods can be hierarchically ordered according to 'for-the-sake-of' relationships. Aristotle says that while some goods are pursued for the sake of something else as 'useful goods', others goods are pursued for their own sake as 'pleasant goods', and finally, the higher level of human goods, 'moral goods', are pursued for their own sake as human perfections or excellence (virtues).

The three-dimensional concept of human goods in human relationships (friendship), described by Aristotle twenty five centuries ago, presents a clear parallelism to the modern three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1987). In this sense, 'continuance commitment', associated with behaviours like staying or leaving an organization after a cost-benefit analysis,

is, in fact, a kind of human action guided by the objective of external or useful goods, as described by Aristotle. He says that “happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added [to the activity], as we said, since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. For, first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth and political power just as we use instruments... And so, as we have said, happiness would seem to need this sort of prosperity added also” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1099b1-5).

As Table II reflects, the ‘cost based dimension’ of commitment refers directly to behaviours/attachment to courses of action, which strive for useful goods – a dimension that could be more widely labelled as a technical-economic dimension, where the rationale explaining attachment to courses of action comes from the value obtained or, negatively speaking: the risk of losing reward that may result from such an action (turnover, absenteeism, change acceptance).

If the first dimension of commitment fits in directly with the first kind of goods described by Aristotle, apparently, the same seems to happen with the second dimension and the pleasant goods. ‘Affective commitment’ is understood as an emotional attachment, as a feeling, impulse or desire that leads employees to want to stay in an organization as the result of this desire. As Aristotle says “the friendship for pleasure is more like (real) friendship; ... [people] find enjoyment in each other or in the same things” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 6, 1158a20).

The second dimension of commitment moves into the arena of enjoyment, of feelings and desires, the same sphere described by Aristotle when talking about the attractiveness of pleasant goods. These kinds of pursued goods can be identified with the affective dimension of commitment, in which the world of emotions explains the attachment to courses of action such as higher implication with organizational goals, means, or people.

But, can we really speak of a perfect fit between ‘affective commitment’ in the sense defined by Allen and Meyer and of ‘pleasant goods’ described by Aristotle? The answer to this question is ‘no’. Definitions taken by Meyer and Allen (1997, p. 12) to build their own concept of ‘affective commitment’ (Ibid, p. 11) include aspects such as identification. We can agree that an individual becomes “identified with” a company, because he likes it (pleasure) or because he considers it the right decision (just, fair, ...). Also, when a person internalizes a set of beliefs, values and/or goals, this process happens because s/he judges these beliefs, values, and goals as compatible or superior to his or her own. Consequently, affective commitment, as it has been defined by Meyer and Allen (1997), includes and mixes aspects referred to in Aristotle terms, as pleasant and moral.

When the third dimension of commitment is compared to the third kind of human goods stated by Aristotle, there is again an apparent parallelism, but, in this case, there are also some important differences that are not so evident in the other two dimensions.

TABLE II

Parallelism between the three dimensions of commitment and the Aristotelian three goods distinction

Three dimensions of <i>commitment</i> by Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001 (pg. 308)	Three kinds of <i>human goods</i> by Aristotle (IV, b.c.)
<i>Continuance commitment</i> “individuals become committed to a course of action because of the perceived <i>cost</i> of failing to do so”	<i>Useful goods</i> People pursue <i>external goods</i> for the aim of its <i>utility</i> . (reward)
<i>Affective commitment</i> “a mind-set characterized by a <i>desire</i> to follow a course of action” (e.g. continue employment, exert effort to achieve organizational goals)“	<i>Pleasant goods</i> People pursue <i>goods</i> for the aim of its <i>pleasure</i> or attractiveness. (satisfaction)
<i>Normative commitment</i> “perceived <i>obligation</i> to pursue a course of action” (i.e., normative commitment)	<i>Moral goods</i> People pursue <i>goods of the soul</i> for the aim of personal <i>excellence</i> . (human fulfillment)

'Normative commitment', understood as "perceived obligation to pursue a course of action", "a sense of moral obligation" or "a sense of duty" (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001), alludes to an obligation in terms of justice and duty. People feel that they ought to pursue a course of action. This third commitment dimension is undoubtedly connected with the moral dimension, or moral good, described by Aristotle. This kind of good properly refers to desirable traits of character and intellect, to human excellence (*arête*, in the Greek language) or moral virtues.

One of these moral virtues could be, to some extent, the concept described by Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) – the sense of duty understood as the force of obligation, as the action, or better to say the habit, of obligating oneself to a course of action, as a demand of one's conscience. Properly speaking, 'normative commitment' can be described as 'moral' – following Jaros et al. (1993) – since there is a moral judgment: a rational evaluation of the conscience about what is 'right' or 'wrong', 'just' or 'unjust', 'fair' or 'unfair' (Hosmer, 1995, p. 20), and not only a feelings.

The sense of duty is, in fact, the moral virtue of 'responsibility', or moral accountability – the willingness to account for one's actions. And, in this sense, this ethical dimension of organizational commitment, that is included in the Aristotelian conception of moral good, should be reviewed since moral good includes other aspects.

'Normative commitment', described by Allen and Meyer, refers to justice, to the awareness of a moral duty and its fulfilment, but morality should not be reduced to the good of justice, as a norm of behaviour, and its habitual practice (virtue). As Aristotle masterly expounds, in a wider conception of ethics, moral goods include every good that contributes to a proper personal fulfilment, that of others, and every human virtue – excellence. 'Moral good', described in Aristotelian tradition, is wider than the content of 'normative commitment'. And, 'affective commitment', as understood by literature, comprise elements of affective tendencies and of rational judgements.

Morality has to do with the right (rational judgement) and proper completion of a human person with human excellence. The moral dimension includes virtues like fairness, responsibility and loyalty, but also honesty, integrity, determination

and courage, among many others. A generally accepted description of virtues for business people adds moral habits like generosity, humility, tolerance, enthusiasm or humour (Solomon, 1992).

### Conceptual propositions

The Aristotelian distinction of human goods into three types seems to give a sound explanation of the three dimensions proposed by Allen and Meyer (1990). The evident parallelism among them is not gratuitous since they describe the reasons (mind-set) to strive for a specific course of action (say commitment); Aristotle explains the reasons or aims for specific human actions, where the concept of good is understood as the goal, or the end, of the action. In this sense, commitment could be based upon the need for useful goods, upon the desire for pleasant goods or upon the obligation of looking for moral good; where the three psychological dimensions (Allen and Meyer, 1990) are in the same level of explanation as the three philosophical distinctions (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1098b15). Therefore, we offer here the following theoretical proposition:

**Proposition 1:** *The generally agreed upon three-dimensional concept of commitment as a mind-set to continue a course of action includes: desire (affective commitment), perceived cost-benefit (technical-economical commitment) and perceived obligation (moral commitment). This three-dimensional distinction has a sound theoretical explanation in the philosophical distinction made by Aristotle among human goods as pleasant, useful, and moral. These three kinds of goods can be described as the aim of each one of the psychological mind-sets established in the literature.*

This parallelism between psychology and the moral philosophy literature offers a sound rational explanation for the three dimensions found, which is not just coming from the meeting of different research lines, but from the study of the logic of human action.

Moreover, it may offer a way of solving the two problems described above. First, the overlapping of the affective and moral dimensions of commitment in most empirical works, and second, the possibility of describing a wider concept of moral commitment, including the normative perspective of moral obligation and moral responsibility, but also the



excellence perspective, and with this one the rest of the moral virtues existing in business people such as enthusiasm, cooperation, tolerance, humility or service (Solomon, 1993).

The distinction between the affective and moral dimensions of commitment, as Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) recently clarify, at least theoretically, is that the first belongs to the sphere of desires and feelings, while the second one moves into the sphere of rational moral perception. In human behaviour, feelings and judgements can be distinguished but not separated, and that is why this mind-set construct of commitment has to make the distinction, but cannot separate both aspects of human behaviour. This explains the early statement of the creators of this commitment construct: "Affective, continuance and normative commitment are best viewed as distinguishable components, rather than types, of attitudinal commitment; that is, employees can experience each of these psychological states to varying degrees... The 'net sum' of a person's commitment to the organization, therefore, reflects each of these separable psychological states" (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

In terms of Aristotle's distinction, commitment could be explained as the voluntary attachment to an entity or to a course of action because of the perceived feeling, desire, and impulse in search of pleasant goods (emotive, but not necessarily rational) and, at the same time, this commitment or attachment is also the result of a perceived benefit or reduced cost (rational analysis concerning useful goods) and the perceived moral obligation (rational analysis in search of moral goods). If we focus the analysis on the role of the affective or the prevailing rational tendency, the three dimensions can be then distinguished, although never separated. We understand that this is the key theoretical element for making a clear distinction between affective and moral commitments. Consequently, we offer a second theoretical proposition:

**Proposition 2:** *On one hand, 'affective organizational commitment' belongs to the sphere of feelings, desires and impulses. This dimension is related to emotions or emotional tendencies, but not to rational judgements. And, on the other hand, 'moral organizational commitment' belongs to the sphere of moral judgement (norms) and moral practice (virtues), both being rational tendencies, theoretical*

*and practical. Both spheres are present in every human action, and can be distinguished but not separated. In order to avoid overlapping while preparing empirical tools, both aspects should be clearly distinguished: affective tendencies and rational tendencies.*

Considering this second proposition, while it might be possible to not have the feelings to stay committed (it not being pleasant or nice), there may still exist the suitability in staying as a result of a moral judgement (justice), and moral practice (virtue of responsibility). The final decision could be the result of the strength of the feelings or of the willingness to follow the judgement of conscience, helped by the necessary practical virtue or habit of character.

Feelings are not always in accordance with moral judgements. To feel or not to feel a moral obligation is not the same as to judge a moral obligation. This is precisely the important added value in the Aristotelian distinction among pleasant, useful and moral goods. As shown in Figure 2, there could be human actions that are unpleasant but proper (i.e., to stay in a conflictive organizational environment to help someone else) as well as advisable actions from the moral point of view which are also pleasant (to cooperate for the common good of the organization via personal contributions). Also, it is always possible to have pleasant feelings in cooperating with a project that is wrong, from the ethical point of view.

Following the above argument, we must say that the current conceptualization of 'affective commitment' given in Allen and Meyer's framework includes both aspects at the same time: feelings (i.e., pleasure or satisfaction for personal achievement)

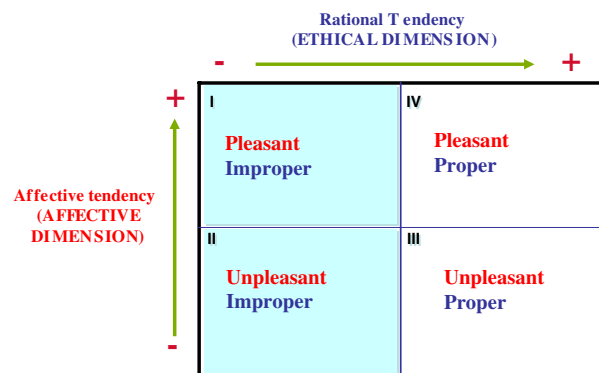


Figure 2. Distinction between affective and ethical dimensions.

and rational moral judgments (i.e., worthiness or rightness). In this sense, such a distinction between feelings and moral judgments should be made clear when talking about ‘identification with’ or ‘integration with’ the organization or a course of actions.

Here we defend the necessity to make a clear distinction between the free identification with an organization or a course of action that is a consequence of feelings (emotive human dimension) and one, which is fruit of a moral judgement (ethical dimension). Now we offer a third proposition.

**Proposition 3:** *‘Affective organizational commitment’ belongs to the sphere of emotions or affective tendencies (desires and impulses). Therefore, its definition should make a clear distinction between feelings and rational judgements. Consequently, affective commitment should include only those voluntary attachments that are the result of affective tendencies (related with pleasure, enjoyment, pride, etc.).*

Therefore, the affective commitment definition and conceptualization should be delineated within the sphere of affective tendencies that corresponds to the ‘pleasant goods’ proposed by Aristotle.

If this distinction is accepted, measurement scales should be revised and developed, making a better distinction between ‘affective organizational commitment’ and ‘moral organizational commitment’. It could also propose a better explanation for the overlapping problem between these two aspects, recognized by their creators (Meyer and Allen, 1997, p. 122), and emphasized by empirical evidence (Ko et al. 1997). Moreover, as we said before, the Aristotelian approach gives not only a rational explanation to avoid overlapping among commitment dimensions, but also the opportunity to develop a wider concept of the moral facet.

If we go back to the Aristotelian approach, morality goes beyond norms. Of course, ethics has to do with moral norms, as emphasized by deontological approaches. Norms are the result of the analysis of what is good, a judgement of moral conscience; but the knowledge of the norm is not enough – its habitual practice is also necessary. The wider Aristotelian conception of ethics includes every good that contributes to a proper personal fulfilment and that of others; it means the practical fulfilment of norms coming from rational judge-

ment, or what is the same, the practice of all human virtues (excellence), not only justice (Polo, 1995).

This tripartite approach including norms, goods and virtues has been already described in business ethics literature as a wider and more balanced conception of moral dimension within the field of management (Whetstone, 2001; Melé, 2005). Three perspectives of ethics are included in Aristotelian tradition: consequences of human action (teleology), moral obligations or duties (deontology), and character development (virtues). This extended moral conceptualization coming from classical philosophy seems to be a sound method to better explain the ethical dimension of organizational commitment. Therefore, we offer the following theoretical proposition:

**Proposition 4:** *‘Moral organizational commitment’ belongs to the sphere of moral judgement (norms) and moral practice (virtues), both being rational tendencies that are the result of theoretical and practical rationality concerning the human good. In this sense, the definition of ‘moral organizational commitment’ could be extended from a normative perspective to a wider tripartite approach that would consider moral ‘norms’, but also, moral ‘goods’ and ‘virtues’.*

When morality goes beyond the field of norms and includes a moral judgement about what is good and how to put it into practice through virtues, then attitudes and behaviours that are voluntary – requiring higher or lower discretionary effort – can be more accurately analysed inside this moral dimension.

At this point, it should be emphasized that, due to the initial attitudinal approach assumed in early organizational commitment works, not much attention has been paid to the reality that commitment is a free decision to do or not to do something. In fact, while authors talk about it as a ‘psychological state’, a “relative strength of an individual’s identification” (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Modway et al., 1982), or “a force that binds an individual to a course of action” (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001, p. 308), in these definitions there is no explicit mention of human will, of the fact that the strength of such a ‘force’ is, properly speaking, the strength of the will of a person, the force of the free decision.

Of course, to talk about a ‘bound’ or ‘attachment’, means a voluntary link, but the voluntarily aspect of such a decision does not seem to have

received much attention in organizational commitment literature.

It could be stated that, in recent multidimensional approaches to organizational commitment, the idea of a free human will, in deciding specific courses of action, is implicit. Nevertheless, we consider that the explicit consideration of the human will become crucial in order to avoid excessively mechanistic interpretations of human behaviour that are incompatible with its moral nature.

In fact, it is not possible to speak about commitment when the course of action that can be observed in an individual is not free: is forced, or is not deliberated. “What comes about by force or because of ignorance seems to be involuntary”, and decisions require deliberation, “what is decided is the result of prior deliberation. For decision involves reason and thought, and even the name itself would seem to indicate that (what is decided, [*prohairesis*] is chosen [*hairesis*] before [*pro*] other things” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 9, 1110a, 36–37 and III, 3, 1112a, 16–19). A link to a course of action that is not voluntary cannot be described as commitment, strictly speaking, precisely because commitment is a human action. Is a coerced commitment really a commitment at all?

There may be “a force that binds an individual to a course of action” (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001), but if that force is not internal, or is not wanted or freely decided by the person, the bond will cease as soon as the external pressure stops. A ‘forced commitment’ will disappear as soon as the external force does.

The importance of explicit consideration of free will, with higher or lower levels of intensity, leads us to suggest a final proposition, with the purpose of complementing existent definitions of organizational commitment.

**Proposition 5:** *Organizational commitment can be defined as a psychological attachment or bond, that is the result of a personal voluntary decision, based on calculated rationality, affective tendencies and moral judgement, which conducts to a higher or lower degree of identification with, and involvement in, a particular organization, and that is observable throughout free effort extended in accomplishing organizational goals.*

This proposed definition of organizational commitment is consistent with the most accepted multidimensional model offered by Allen, Mayer and collaborators. The tripartite mind-set of the concept

remains intact, and also the idea of different degrees or strengths to pursue a course of action; but we suggest a philosophical Aristotelian foundation for the presence of the three dimensions (proposition 1). Taken root in the same tradition, we propose a distinction between the affective and moral dimensions of commitment, the first belonging to the sphere of feelings or emotional tendencies, and the second to rational tendencies (proposition 2).

This analysis from the Aristotelian perspective, affords us the opportunity to better understand the overlapping between affective and moral dimensions, showing some elements that have been traditionally included in the affective dimension, when they constitute decisions based mainly in moral judgements (proposition 3).

The same philosophical analysis allows for the extension of the conception of morality from a normative approach to a wider one that considers both moral goods and moral virtues (proposition 4). This also points out the importance of explicitly including the role of human will in commitment definition. We defend the importance of making explicit that commitment is a free human decision to accomplish a course of action; without freedom, there would not be a real commitment, but a forced decision (proposition 5).

This final proposition may open the door for a more fruitful dialog between literature in business ethics – where loyalty is considered a moral virtue (Coughlan, 2005; Melé, 2001) – and the moral dimension of commitment described in the fields of management and psychology.

## Conclusion

Through the review of some prominent research works in the field of organizational commitment we have analysed the three-dimensional framework that allows for a distinction between ‘continuance’, ‘affective’ and ‘normative’ dimensions of commitment.

The aim of this work has been to look for new theoretical contributions that may clarify the true nature of organizational commitment, and the definition of its ‘affective’ and ‘normative’ dimensions. Our main argument is that a theoretically solid explanation for the three-dimensional conception of commitment is still necessary, and it could help to

solve problems derived from the overlap of the affective and normative dimensions. Moreover, as it has been an unresolved theme of interest in the literature; the normative dimension seems to be too narrow, and should be amplified.

First, after a review of the nature of the phenomenon, its antecedents, purposes and consequences, our attention was caught by the poorly defined concept of commitment. Is it an attitudinal or a behavioural concept? Is it a 'psychological state' or an act of the will? Is it a consequence of an emotional or a rational decision?

Second, if we look at the description of 'continuance', 'affective' and 'normative' commitment dimensions, some questions arise about the reliability and validity of this three-dimensional model. Here, our main concern focused on the overlapping between affective and normative commitments. In fact when reviewing the literature, high statistical correlations and lack of discriminating validity have been found between 'affective' and 'normative' commitments. That means that it is not clear yet how the two dimensions are conceptually separable, and also, that a considerable conceptual redundancy exists.

We defend that these problems have to do with the way in which 'affective' and 'normative' commitment are defined. In the specialised literature, 'affective commitment' includes aspects related to feelings, but also to moral judgments, confusing them.

Like other authors have recognised, a sound theoretical base to provide solutions for the problems described is necessary. This piece of work uses the Aristotelian tradition to build a more accurate explanation of this phenomenon.

Until now, commitment dimensions were the result of the meeting of three lines of research. We defend that the philosophical distinction made by Aristotle among human goods as useful, pleasant and moral, give a sound theoretical explanation for the three-dimensional framework of commitment.

This Aristotelian approach, also offers a theoretical basis to make a clear distinction between 'affective organizational commitment', which belongs to the sphere of feelings, and 'normative organizational commitment' which belongs to the sphere of moral judgement (norms). We propose that the first dimension is related to emotions or affective ten-

dencies (desires and impulses), while the second corresponds to rational tendencies. In line with the literature, this work maintains that both spheres are present in every human action, and can be distinguished but not separated.

As recognised by commitment literature, normative commitment reduces ethics to moral judgements about norms. In order to give clear conceptual independence to this dimension, authors propose a wider conceptualized, labelled 'moral commitment', which includes norms (ethical judgements) and virtues (good moral practices), both rational tendencies which are the result of theoretical and practical rationality concerning human good. Then, the definition of 'moral organizational commitment' could be extended from a normative perspective to a wider approach that would consider moral 'norms', along with moral 'goods' and 'virtues' as well.

Finally, this paper proposes a definition of organizational commitment as an attachment or bound that is a personal voluntary decision based on calculated rationality, affective tendency and moral judgement, which leads to a higher or lower degree of identification with, and involvement in, a particular organization; and that is observable in the free effort extended in accomplishing organizational goals.

The proposed conceptualization highlights the need to make explicit the presence of human will when defining commitment.

The authors are conscious of the limitations of this paper. The work presented here is of a theoretical nature and the result of reflection on the organizational commitment literature. We are aware of the need for further empirical research to verify propositions presented.

Nevertheless, this work may have some implications for further research. First, new measures are needed that adequately represent a more accurate conceptualization of the affective dimension of commitment (affective tendencies) and also a wider conceptualization of the moral dimension of commitment (moral judgements and virtues). Scales should be reviewed to introduce better distinctions and to include moral goods and moral virtues (i.e., contribution to the common good, service attitude, humility, industriousness, etc.).

Second, statistical analysis should be carried out in order to check if the correlation and lack of

discriminating validity between affective and moral commitment is overcome; and also, if moral commitment gains independence and explanatory power.

Third, in order to make a proper distinction between commitment dimensions (continuance, affective and moral) and its consequences (actions), it would be advisable to empirically observe if the presence of different commitment dimensions explain different behavioural outcomes as Meyer and Allen (1997) predict.

## Note

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